



From : Joe Dorward
Sent : 3 August 2010
To : Adam Watson
Subject : Trees And Red Deer Numbers

Adam,

I read your interesting paper on the trees & deer of Mar last night. You'll probably not be surprised to learn that I have concerns about how the NTS has handled this issue.

I suppose the death of William, 1st Earl Fife in 1763 is significant for trees & deer numbers. It is my understanding that William took little interest in Mar, but that his son James, 2nd Earl Fife gradually became more and more interested in it hunting there. I suppose it's key (as you said) that until James, 2nd Earl really took an interest in hunting deer at Mar deer numbers were kept at something like sustainable levels by 'potchers' and from not being encouraged.

I wonder how many deer were on Mar at that time for him to consider deer scarce. It seems evident that James, 2nd Earl Fife began taking steps to preserved deer for hunting soon after the death of his father in 1763, and that many, if not most, of the existing trees were seeded during that time. Whatever the deer numbers were when he inherited Mar, it seems evident that they were a level compatible with the natural regeneration of the woods.

As the numbers of deer rose, there must have been a period when there were still too few deer to have a significant impact on seedlings. I'm suggesting that among the youngest trees, that there may be a significant number of trees in a particular age group to date the period when deer numbers rose to the point where they began to have a significant effect on tree numbers.

Clearly the Duffs and their successors maintained such high deer numbers that no significant natural tree regeneration could take place. I remember the days when one would see herds wherever one went on Mar. I was struck at how few deer I saw on my recent visits to Am Beitheachan, Glen Quoich, Gleann Doire, Gleann Dhé, and Gleann Giubhsachain - in 4-days on the hill there I saw no more than a handful of young deer suggesting a near total eradication of deer in these areas. Without deer these areas felt sterile - unlike when I crossed from Glen Ey to Bynack where I saw several dozen at least.

Although I accept the argument that deer numbers were too high to allow the natural regeneration of the woodland, I think deer should be as much a feature of the woodland, as the trees themselves. I suspect the NTS (once again) of being heavy handed ; of being in too much of a hurry to show the results of another programme for political reasons to do strike a balance.

Is it the case that deer only eat seedlings when there's not enough other grazing to eat - or are they so indiscriminate that they just eat everything edible ?

It's evident from your paper that there was a time when deer numbers were compatible with natural regeneration of the woodland. It seems evident then that deer and trees are not incompatible. It also seems evident that some number of deer could be left in the woodland that would still allow its natural regeneration without fencing, and I suspect that number would be significantly higher than exists today.

Do you agree that the NTS have been heavy handed again, and that they've killed many more deer than necessary ? If so - how many deer do you think the old forest could sustain without affecting its natural regeneration ?

Joe